

Prostitution and Male Supremacy

by Andrea Dworkin

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[Andrea Dworkin delivered this speech at a symposium entitled "Prostitution: From Academia to Activism," sponsored by the Michigan Journal of Gender and Law at the University of Michigan Law School, October 31, 1992.]

I'm very honored to be here with my friends and my peers, my sisters in this movement.

I also feel an awful lot of conflict about being here, because it is very hard to think about talking about prostitution in an academic setting. It's really difficult.

The assumptions of academia can barely begin to imagine the reality of life for women in prostitution. Academic life is premised on the notion that there is a tomorrow and a next day and a next day; or that someone can come inside from the cold for time to study; or that there is some kind of discourse of ideas and a year of freedom in which you can have disagreements that will not cost you your life. These are premises that those who are students here or who teach here act on every day. They are antithetical to the lives of women who are in prostitution or who have been in prostitution.

If you have been in prostitution, you do not have tomorrow in your mind, because tomorrow is a very long time away. You cannot assume that you will live from minute to minute. You cannot and you do not. If you do, then you are stupid, and to be stupid in the world of prostitution is to be hurt, is to be dead. No woman who is prostituted can afford to be that stupid, such that she would actually believe that tomorrow will come.

I cannot reconcile these different premises. I can only say that the premises of the prostituted woman are my premises. They are the ones that I act from. They are the ones that my work has been based on all of these years. I cannot accept--because I cannot believe--the premises of the feminism that comes out of the academy: the feminism that says we will hear all these sides year after year, and then, someday, in the future, by some process that we have not yet found, we will decide what is right and what is true. That does not make sense to me. I understand that to many of you it does make sense. I am talking across the biggest cultural divide in my own life. I have been trying to talk across it for twenty years with what I would consider marginal success.

I want to bring us back to basics. Prostitution: what is it? It is the use of a woman's body for sex by a man, he pays money, he does what he wants. The minute you move away from what it really is, you move away from prostitution into the world of ideas. You will feel better; you will have a better time; it is more fun; there is plenty to discuss, but you will be discussing ideas, not prostitution. Prostitution is not an idea. It is the mouth, the vagina, the rectum, penetrated usually by a penis, sometimes hands, sometimes objects, by one man and then another and then another and then another and then another. That's what it is.

I ask you to think about your own bodies--if you can do so outside the world that the pornographers have created in your minds, the flat, dead, floating mouths and vaginas and anuses of women. I ask you to think concretely about your own bodies used that way. How sexy is it? Is it fun? The people who defend prostitution and pornography want you to feel a kinky little thrill every time you think of something being stuck in a woman. I want you to feel the delicate tissues in her body that are being misused. I want you to feel what it feels like when it happens over and over and over and over and over and over and over again: because that is what prostitution is.

Which is why--from the perspective of a woman in prostitution or a woman who has been in prostitution--the distinctions other people make between whether the event took place in the Plaza Hotel or somewhere more

inelegant are not the distinctions that matter. These are irreconcilable perceptions, with irreconcilable premises. Of course the circumstances must matter, you say. No, they do not, because we are talking about the use of the mouth, the vagina, and the rectum. The circumstances don't mitigate or modify what prostitution is.

And so, many of us are saying that prostitution is intrinsically abusive. Let me be clear. I am talking to you about prostitution per se, without more violence, without extra violence, without a woman being hit, without a woman being pushed. Prostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body. Those of us who say this are accused of being simple-minded. But prostitution is very simple. And if you are not simple-minded, you will never understand it. The more complex you manage to be, the further away from the reality you will be-- the safer you will be, the happier you will be, the more fun you will have discussing the issue of prostitution. In prostitution, no woman stays whole. It is impossible to use a human body in the way women's bodies are used in prostitution and to have a whole human being at the end of it, or in the middle of it, or close to the beginning of it. It's impossible. And no woman gets whole again later, after. Women who have been abused in prostitution have some choices to make. You have seen very brave women here make some very important choices: to use what they know; to try to communicate to you what they know. But nobody gets whole, because too much is taken away when the invasion is inside you, when the brutality is inside your skin. We try so hard to communicate, all of us to each other, the pain. We plead, we make analogies. The only analogy I can think of concerning prostitution is that it is more like gang rape than it is like anything else.

Oh, you say, gang rape is completely different. An innocent woman is walking down the street and she is taken by surprise. Every woman is that same innocent woman. Every woman is taken by surprise. In a prostitute's life, she is taken by surprise over and over and over and over and over again. The gang rape is punctuated by a money exchange. That's all. That's the only difference. But money has a magical quality, doesn't it? You give a woman money and whatever it is that you did to her she wanted, she deserved. Now, we understand about male labor. We understand that men do things they do not like to do in order to earn a wage. When men do alienating labor in a factory we do not say that the money transforms the experience for them such that they loved it, had a good time, and in fact, aspired to nothing else. We look at the boredom, the dead-endedness; we say, surely the quality of a man's life should be better than that.

The magical function of money is gendered; that is to say, women are not supposed to have money, because when women have money, presumably women can make choices, and one of the choices that women can make is not to be with men. And if women make the choice not to be with men, men will then be deprived of the sex that men feel they have a right to. And if it is required that a whole class of people be treated with cruelty and indignity and humiliation, put into a condition of servitude, so that men can have the sex that they think they have a right to, then that is what will happen. That is the essence and the meaning of male dominance. Male dominance is a political system.

It is always extraordinary, when looking at this money exchange, to understand that in most people's minds the money is worth more than the woman is. The ten dollars, the thirty dollars, the fifty dollars, is worth much more than her whole life. The money is real, more real than she is. With the money he can buy a human life and erase its importance from every aspect of civil and social consciousness and conscience and society, from the protections of law, from any right of citizenship, from any concept of human dignity and human sovereignty. For fifty fucking dollars any man can do that. If you were going to think of a way to punish women for being women, poverty would be enough. Poverty is hard. It hurts. The bitches would be sorry they're women. It's hard to be hungry. It's hard not to have a nice place to live in. You feel real desperate. Poverty is very punishing. But poverty isn't enough, because poverty alone does not provide a pool of women for men to fuck on demand. Poverty is insufficient to create that pool of women, no matter how hungry women get. So, in different cultures, societies are organized differently to get the same result: not only are women poor, but the only thing of value a woman has is her so-called sexuality, which, along with her body, has been turned into a sellable commodity. Her so-called sexuality becomes the only thing that matters; her body becomes the only thing that anyone wants to buy. An assumption then can be made: if she is poor and needs money, she will be selling sex. The assumption may be wrong. The assumption does not create the pool of women who are prostituted. It takes more than that. In our society, for instance, in the

population of women who are prostituted now, we have women who are poor, who have come from poor families; they are also victims of child sexual abuse, especially incest; and they have become homeless.

Incest is boot camp. Incest is where you send the girl to learn how to do it. So you don't, obviously, have to send her anywhere, she's already there and she's got nowhere else to go. She's trained. And the training is specific and it is important: not to have any real boundaries to her own body; to know that she's valued only for sex; to learn about men what the offender, the sex offender, is teaching her. But even that is not enough, because then she runs away and she is out on the streets and homeless. For most women, some version of all these kinds of destitution needs to occur.

I have thought a lot in the last couple of years about the meaning of homelessness for women. I think that it is, in a literal sense, a precondition, along with incest and poverty in the United States, to create a population of women who can be prostituted. But it has a wider meaning, too. Think about where any woman really has a home. No child is safe in a society in which one out of three girls is going to be sexually abused before she is eighteen. [1](#) No wife is safe in a society in which recent figures appear to say that one out of two married women has been or is being beaten. [2](#) We are the homemakers; we make these homes but we have no right to them. I think that we have been wrong to say that prostitution is a metaphor for what happens to all women. I think that homelessness really is that metaphor. I think that women are dispossessed of a place to live that is safe, that belongs to the woman herself, a place in which she has not just sovereignty over her own body but sovereignty over her actual social life, whether it is life in a family or among friends. In prostitution, a woman remains homeless.

But there is something very specific about the condition of prostitution that I would like to try to talk about with you.

I want to emphasize that in these conversations, these discussions about prostitution, we are all looking for language. We are all trying to find ways to say what we know and also to find out what we don't know. There is a middle-class presumption that one knows everything worth knowing. It is the presumption of most prostituted women that one knows nothing worth knowing. In fact, neither thing is true. What matters here is to try to learn what the prostituted woman knows, because it is of immense value. It is true and it has been hidden. It has been hidden for a political reason: to know it is to come closer to knowing how to undo the system of male dominance that is sitting on top of all of us.

I think that prostitutes experience a specific inferiority. Women in general are considered to be dirty. Most of us experience this as a metaphor, and, yes, when things get very bad, when terrible things happen, when a woman is raped, when a woman is battered, yes, then you recognize that underneath your middle-class life there are assumptions that because you are a woman you are dirty. But a prostitute lives the literal reality of being the dirty woman. There is no metaphor. She is the woman covered in dirt, which is to say that every man who has ever been on top of her has left a piece of himself behind; and she is also the woman who has a purely sexual function under male dominance so that to the extent people believe that sex is dirty, people believe that prostituted women are dirt.

The prostituted woman is, however, not static in this dirtiness. She's contagious. She's contagious because man after man after man comes on her and then he goes away. For instance, in discussions of AIDS, the prostituted woman is seen as the source of the infection. That is a specific example. In general, the prostituted woman is seen as the generative source of everything that is bad and wrong and rotten with sex, with the man, with women. She is seen as someone who is deserving of punishment, not just because of what she "does"--and I put *does* in quotes, since mostly it is done to her--but because of what she is.

She is, of course, the ultimate anonymous woman. Men love it. While she is on her twenty-fourth false name--dolly, baby, cutie, cherry tart, whatever all the pornographers are cooking up this week as a marketing device--her namelessness says to the man, she's nobody real, I don't have to deal with her, she doesn't have a last name at all, I don't have to remember who she is, she's not somebody specific to me, she's a generic embodiment of woman. She is perceived as, treated as--and I want you to remember this,

this is real--vaginal slime. She is dirty; a lot of men have been there. A lot of semen, a lot of vaginal lubricant. This is visceral, this is real, this is what happens. Her anus is often torn from the anal intercourse, it bleeds. Her mouth is a receptacle for semen, that is how she is perceived and treated. All women are considered dirty because of menstrual blood but she bleeds other times, other places. She bleeds because she's been hurt, she bleeds and she's got bruises on her.

When men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body. It is as pure as anything on this earth ever is or ever has been. It is a contempt so deep, so deep, that a whole human life is reduced to a few sexual orifices, and he can do anything he wants. Other women at this conference have told you that. I want you to understand, believe them. It's true. He can do anything he wants. She has nowhere to go. There is no cop to complain to; the cop may well be the guy who is doing it. The lawyer that she goes to will want payment in kind. When she needs medical help, it turns out he's just another john. Do you understand? She is literally nothing. Now, many of us have experiences in which we feel like nothing, or we know that someone considers us to be nothing or less than nothing, worthless, but for a woman in prostitution, this is the experience of life every day, day in and day out.

He, meanwhile, the champion here, the hero, the man, he's busy bonding with other men through the use of her body. One of the reasons he is there is because some man has been there before him and some man will be there after him. This is not theory. When you live it, you see that it is true. Men use women's bodies in prostitution and in gang rape to communicate with each other, to express what they have in common. And what they have in common is that they are not her. So she becomes the vehicle of his masculinity and his homoeroticism, and he uses the words to tell her that. He shares the sexuality of the words, as well as the acts, directed at her, with other men. All of those dirty words are just the words that he uses to tell her what she is. (And from the point of view of any woman who has been prostituted--if she were to express that point of view, which it is likely she will not--the fight that male artists wage for the right to use dirty words is one of the sicker and meaner jokes on the face of this earth, because there is no law, no rule, no etiquette, no courtesy that stops any man from using every single one of those words on any prostituted woman; and the words have the sting that they are supposed to have because in fact they are describing her.) She's expendable. Funny, she has no name. She is a mouth, a vagina, and an anus, who needs her in particular when there are so many others? When she dies, who misses her? Who mourns her? She's missing, does anybody go look for her? I mean, who is she? She is no one. Not metaphorically no one. Literally, no one.

Now, in the history of genocide, for instance, the Nazis referred to the Jews as lice and they said, we are going to exterminate them. [3](#) In the history of the slaughter of the indigenous people of the Americas, those who made policy said, they're lice, kill them. [4](#) Catharine MacKinnon talked earlier about gender cleansing: murdering prostitutes. She is right. Prostituted women are women who are there, available for the gynocidal kill. And prostituted women are being killed every single day, and we don't think we're facing anything resembling an emergency. Why should we? They're no one. When a man kills a prostitute, he feels righteous. It is a righteous kill. He has just gotten rid of a piece of dirt, and the society tells him he is right.

There is also a specific kind of dehumanization experienced by women who are prostituted. Yes, all women experience being objects, being treated like objects. But prostituted women are treated like a certain kind of object, which is to say, a target. A target isn't any old object. You might take pretty good care of some objects that you have around the house. But a target you go after. You put the dart in the hole. That's what the prostitute is for. What that should tell you is how much aggression goes into what a man does when he seeks out, finds, and uses a prostituted woman.

One of the conflicts that I feel about talking here, being here, is that I am afraid that anything I say that is even slightly abstract will immediately move everyone's mind off of the fundamental issue. And the fundamental issue is what is done to women who are in prostitution, what exactly prostitution is. But I have to risk that because I want to say to you that you can't think about prostitution unless you are willing to think about the man who needs to fuck the prostitute. Who is he? What is he doing? What does he want? What does he need?

He is everyone. I want you to take one hour, on Monday. I want you to walk through your school, and I want you to look at every man. I want you to take his clothes off with your eyes. I want you to see him with a stiff prick. I want you in your mind to put him on top of a woman with money on the table next to them. Everyone. The dean of this law school, the professors, the male students, everyone. If you are going to the emergency room, I want you to do it. If you have a heart attack, I want you to do it with the intern who is taking care of you. Because this is the world that prostituted women live in. It is a world in which no matter what happens to you, there is another man who wants a piece of you. And if you need something from him, you have to give him that piece.

Men who use prostitutes think they are real big and real brave. They're very proud of themselves--they brag a lot. They write novels, they write songs, they write laws--productive folk--and they have a sense that they are very adventurous and heroic, and why do they think that? Because they are predators who go out and hump women--they rub up against a woman who's dirty and they live to tell about it. Goddamn it. They live to tell about it. Unfortunately. Virtually all the time, no matter what they have done, no matter what harm they have done to her--they live to tell about it, sing about it, write about it, make television shows about it, make movies about it. I would like to say to you that these men are cowards, that these men are brutes, that these men are fools, that these men are able to do what they do because they have the power of men as a class behind them, which they get because men use force against women. If you want a definition of what a coward is, it's needing to push a whole class of people down so that you can walk on top of them. Societies are organized so that men have the power they need, to use women the way that they want to. Societies can be organized in different ways and still create a population of women who are prostituted. For instance, in the United States the women are poor, the women are mostly incest victims, the women are homeless. In parts of Asia, they were sold into slavery at the age of six months because they were females. That is how they do it there. It does not have to be done the same way in every place to be the same thing.

Male dominance means that the society creates a pool of prostitutes by any means necessary so that men have what men need to stay on top, to feel big, literally, metaphorically, in every way; and yet men are our standard for being human. We say we want to be human. We say that we want them to treat us like human beings. In a male-dominant society, men are the human beings. I want to point out to you that we use the word *human* metaphorically. We are not talking about how men act. We are talking about an idea, a dream, a vision that we have, of what a human being is. We are saying that we do not want them stepping on top of us; we are also saying implicitly that they are not a good enough standard for what being human is because look at what they are doing to us. We cannot want to be like them because being like them means using people the way that they use people--for the sake of establishing one's importance or one's identity. I am saying that in part men are mythological figures to us when we talk about them as human beings. We are not talking about how men really behave. We are talking about the mythology of men as arbiters of civilization. This political movement involves understanding that the human qualities that we want in life with each other are not qualities that characterize the way men really behave.

What prostitution does in a society of male dominance is that it establishes a social bottom beneath which there is no bottom. It is the bottom. Prostituted women are all on the bottom. And all men are above it. They may not be above it much but even men who are prostituted are above the bottom that is set by prostituted women and girls. Every man in this society benefits from the fact that women are prostituted whether or not every man uses a woman in prostitution. This should not have to be said but it has to be said: prostitution comes from male dominance, not from female nature. It is a political reality that exists because one group of people has and maintains power over another group of people. I underline that because I want to say to you that male domination is cruel. I want to say to you that male domination must be destroyed. Male domination needs to be ended, not simply reformed, not made a little nicer, and not made a little nicer for some women. We need to look at the role of men--really look at it, study it, understand it--in keeping women poor, in keeping women homeless, in keeping girls raped, which is to say, in creating prostitutes, a population of women who will be used in prostitution. We need to look at the role of men in romanticizing prostitution, in making its cost to women culturally invisible, in using the power of this society, the economic power, the cultural power, the social power, to create silence, to create silence among those who have been hurt, the silence of the women who have been used.

We need to look at the role of men in creating a hatred of women, in creating prejudice against women, in using the culture to support, promote, advocate, celebrate aggression against women. We need to look at the role of men in creating a political idea of freedom that only they can actually have. Isn't that funny? What is freedom? Two thousand years of discourse and somehow it manages to leave us out. It is an amazingly self-serving monologue that they have had going here. We need to look at the role of men in creating political systems that subordinate women; and that means that we have to look at the role of men in creating prostitution, in protecting prostitution--how law enforcement does it, how journalism does it, how lawyers do it. We need to know the ways in which all those men use prostitutes and in doing so destroy the human dignity of the women.

The cure to this problem is political. That means taking power away from men. This is real stuff; it is serious stuff. They have too much of it. They do not use it right. They are bullies. They do not have a right to what they have; and that means it has to be taken away from them. We have to take the power that they have to use us away from them. We have to take the power that they have to hurt us away from them. We have to take their money away from them. They have too much of it. Any man who has enough money to spend degrading a woman's life in prostitution has too much money. He does not need what he's got in his pocket. But there is a woman who does.

We need to take away their social dominance--over us. We live in a tyranny of liars and hypocrites and sadists.

Now, it will cost you to fight them. They have to be taken off of women, do you understand me? They need to be lifted up and off. What is intractable about prostitution is male dominance. And it is male dominance that has to be ended so that women will not be prostituted.

You, you--you have to weaken and destroy every institution that is part of how men rule over women. And don't ask if you should. The question is how, not if. How? Do one thing, rather than spend your lives debating if you should do this or if you should do that and do they really deserve it and is it really fair? Fair? Is it really fair? Darlings, we could get the machine guns out tonight. Fair? We break our own hearts with these questions. Is it fair? Don't respect their laws. No. Don't respect their laws. Women need to be making laws. I hope that Catharine MacKinnon and I have set an example. We have tried to. There is no reason for any woman, any woman in the world, to be basically performing fellatio on the current legal system. But mostly that is what one is in law school to learn how to do.

What I hope you will take away from here is this: that any vestige of sex hierarchy, any, will mean that some women somewhere are being prostituted. If you look around you and you see male supremacy, you know that somewhere where you cannot see, a woman is being prostituted, because every hierarchy needs a bottom and prostitution is the bottom of male dominance. So when you accommodate, when you compromise, when you turn a blind eye, you are collaborating. Yes, I know that your life is also at stake but yes you are collaborating, both things are true, in the destruction of another woman's life.

I am asking you to make yourselves enemies of male dominance, because it has to be destroyed for the crime of prostitution to end--the crime against the woman, the human-rights crime of prostitution: and everything else is besides the point, a lie, an excuse, an apology, a justification, and all the abstract words are lies, justice, liberty, equality, they are lies. As long as women are being prostituted they are lies. You can tell the lie and in this institution you will be taught how to tell the lie; or you can use your lives to dismantle the system that creates and then protects this abuse. You, a well-trained person, can stand with the abuser or with the rebel, the resister, the revolutionary. You can stand with the sister he is doing it to; and if you are very brave you can try to stand between them so that he has to get through you to get to her. That, by the way, is the meaning of the often misused word *choice*. These are choices. I am asking you to make a choice.